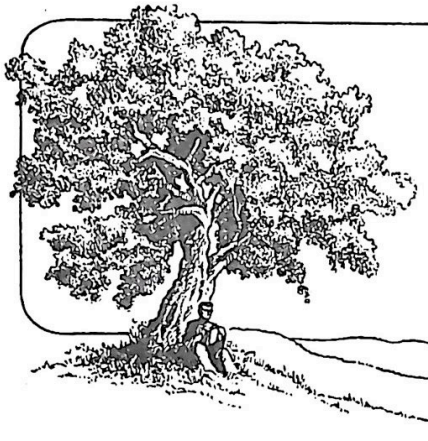


READER'S DIGEST

The World's Best Reading

HEART OF THE WEST

O. Henry

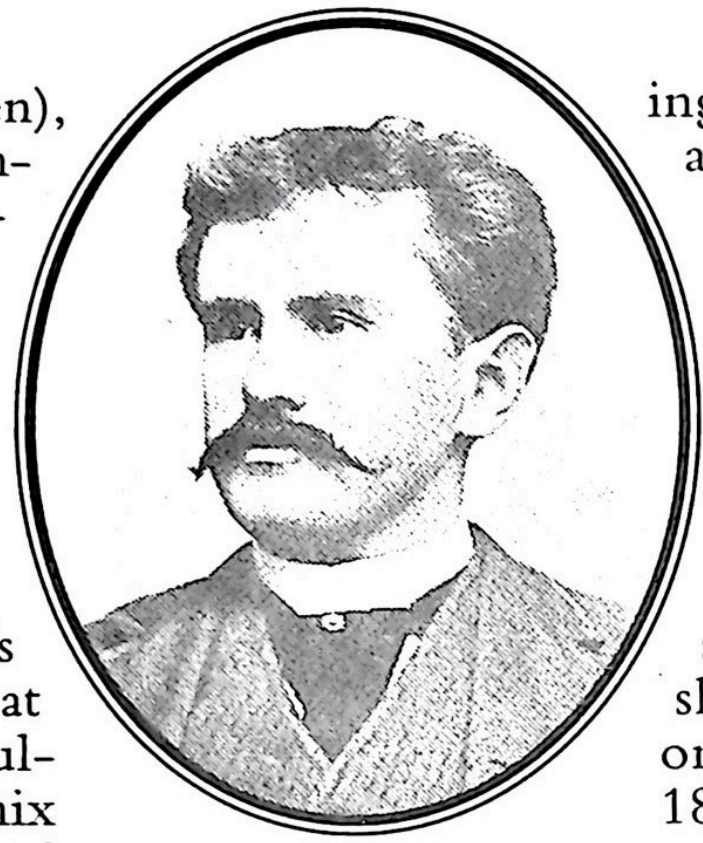
As O. Henry slept peacefully one night under wide-open skies on the Texas prairie, he was roused by screaming cowboys galloping around him with guns blazing. Then the men got off their horses, tied him up in a blanket, and thrashed him with their leather leggings. After the ordeal ended an hour later, O. Henry sat around a campfire with his tormentors, sipping coffee and singing songs. It had been an initiation rite into the cowboy fraternity, and O. Henry was now a full-fledged member of the brotherhood of the range.

It may not sound like the O. Henry we have come to know and love — the Southern dandy sporting a bow tie and bowler hat who haunted the back alleys and dive bars of lower Manhattan — yet it was simply another side of the same man. Years after leaving Texas, at the height of his fame in New York City, O. Henry reached back in his memory and brought his youth to life. To his original cast of hoboes and con men he added an equally endearing assortment of cowpokes and cattle barons, and he immortalized these frontier figures in a colorful collection of stories he called *Heart of the West.*

The man millions would come to know as O. Henry was born William Sydney Porter on September 11, 1862, in Greensboro, North Carolina. Will never knew parental love (his mother died when he was three years old and his father was a happy-go-lucky alcoholic who never paid much atten-

The place: Texas and its environs. The time: the turn of the century. The storyteller: O. Henry. That's right — O. Henry. Long before he became famous for his tales of Old New York, this chronicler of the common man painted an unparalleled portrait of life in the Old West. He called it Heart of the West, *perhaps because it was so dear to his own.*

tion to his children), but he did have a family. He grew up under the strict but loving care of his grandmother, Ruth Porter, and an aunt, Evalina Swaim.



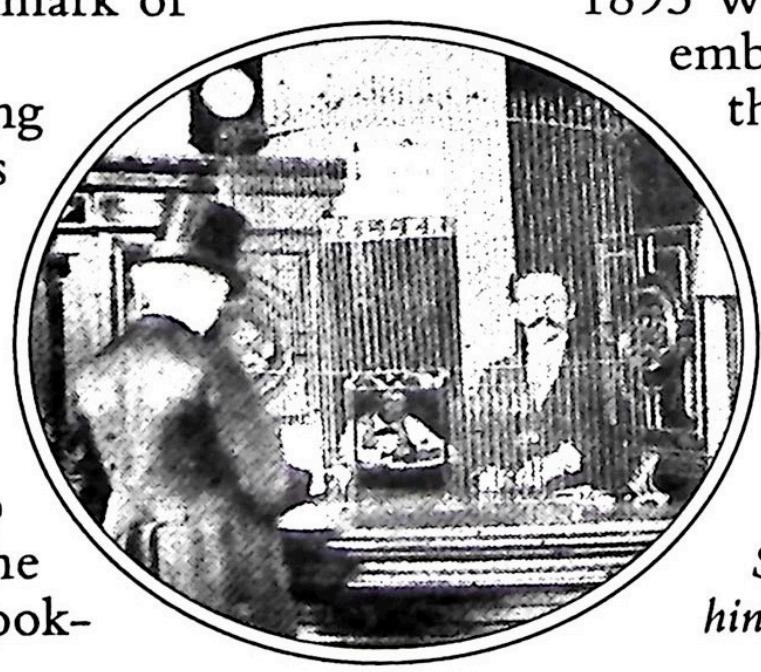
O. Henry

At the age of 15 Will left school to work in his uncle's pharmacy. For hours at a time he would pulverize chemicals, mix medicinal syrups, and sell cigars — tedious chores not well suited to his artistic nature. As if the drudgery weren't bad enough, his health (never robust to begin with) began to deteriorate. By his late teens Will had developed a hacking cough that could not be cured. On the advice of a physician whose son managed a ranch in Texas, Will left his humid hometown for the drier air of the Southwest. Once there, the frail 20-year-old was treated as a guest and not required to do any of the dangerous, arduous work of maintaining the huge spread. Will would spend hours stretched out under an old oak tree with a dictionary, enriching his vocabulary with highfalutin words that would later become a hallmark of his stories.

As the invigorating climate restored his health, Will moved to Austin, where he worked as a draftsman in the Texas Land Office. With a steady job under his belt, the young man began looking for companionship, and found it in 17-year-old Athol Estes. The couple faced problems right from the start, however, for Athol's mother did not think much of Will's prospects. Under pressure to sever their relationship, the two eloped one July afternoon in 1887. Athol's mother eventually gave them her blessing, and Will, very much in love, settled down into the happiest years of his life.

To supplement his salary, Will sold humorous sketches to newspapers in Detroit and New York, which encouraged him to consider a career in journalism. But in 1891 he went to work as a teller at the First National Bank in Austin, an institution known for its shady clientele and careless bookkeeping. In his spare time he continued to write stories, attracting the attention of the *Houston Post,* which offered him a job. It was a dream come true for Will, who soon had his own column.

But then the dream was shattered by a nightmare. In July of 1895 Will was charged with embezzling $1,000 from the bank. Panicked



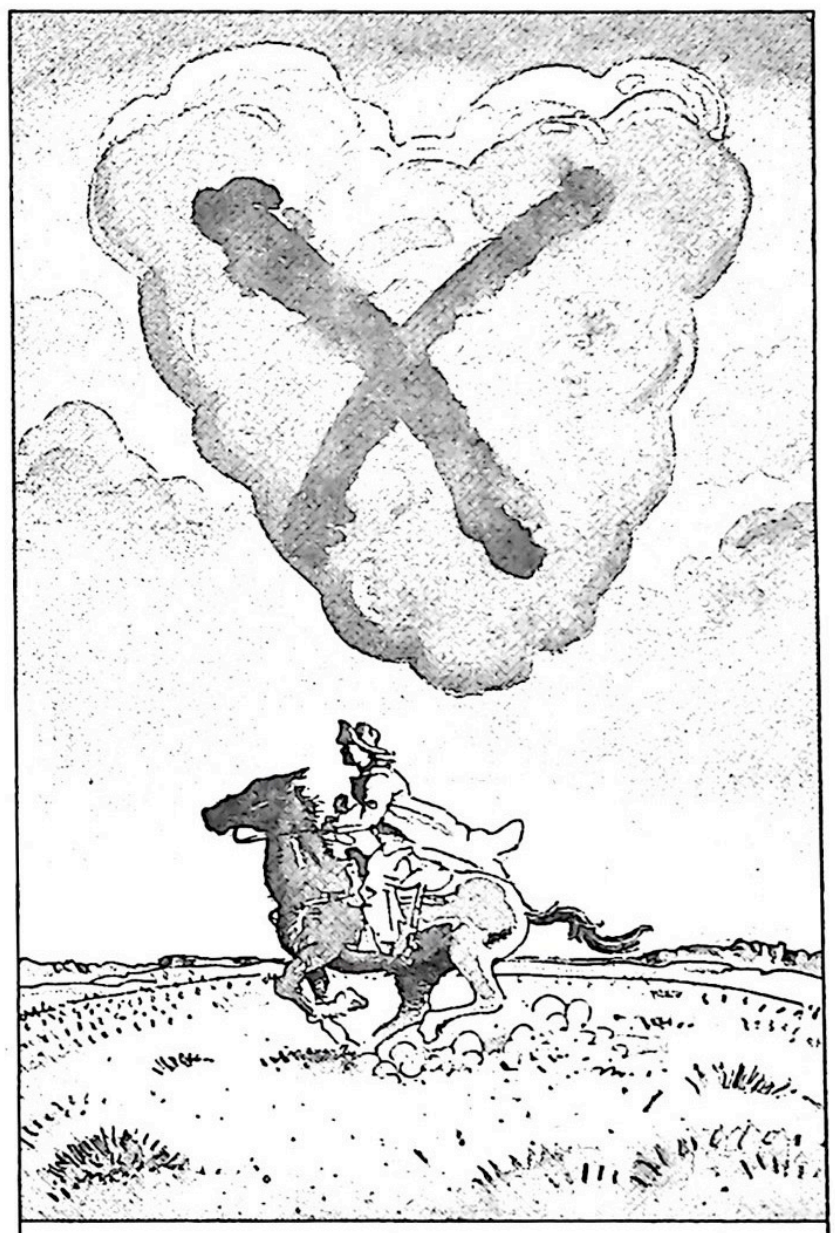
With a tragic touch of irony that O. Henry would certainly have appreciated, young Will Porter poses in his teller's cage at the First National Bank in Austin, Texas. Seven years later he would be behind bars in a penitentiary.

and distraught, he boarded a train bound for Austin, where he was scheduled to be arraigned. But 50 miles short of his destination he hopped off and caught a train headed in the opposite direction. In New Orleans, Will booked passage on a steamer headed for Honduras, a country that did not have an extradition treaty with the United States. Living as a fugitive among revolutionaries, oligarchs, and expatriate Americans, he found a setting and characters that would later appear in some of his most memorable stories.

He remained in Central America until he learned that Athol, who was fighting tuberculosis, had taken a turn for the worse. Returning to Austin, he turned himself in and was permitted to stay by his wife's side until her death. When Will's time of reckoning came six months later, he was convicted and sentenced to five years in a penitentiary. "I want to state solemnly to you that I am absolutely innocent," Will wrote to his mother-in-law. But he later told a friend, "I held a position of trust. I failed that trust when I permitted such an outrageous thing to happen."

Thanks to a prison doctor who believed in his innocence, Will's term was far from harsh. He was given a job in the dispensary and slept on a quiet cot away from the other inmates. Still, these comforts did not soothe his inner anguish. "In my experience of handling over 10,000 prisoners," the doctor once remarked, "I have never known a man who was so deeply humiliated." Will did not hesitate to discuss his suffering. In a letter to his mother-in-law he confessed: "I often get as blue as anyone can get, and feel as thoroughly miserable as anyone can feel."

He wrote more than letters, however. After his shift at the pharmacy ended about midnight, Will would retreat to his cot and compose short stories until dawn. It was during this period that he adopted the pseudonym O. Henry, perhaps in an attempt to forget the one assigned to him by the government: Federal Prisoner No. 30664. Will claimed that he found the name in



The Illustrations

This edition of *Heart of the West* features artwork by Joseph Ciardiello, a frequent contributor to *Reader's Digest* magazine. His work has appeared in numerous publications and exhibitions, and has been honored with a silver medal from the prestigious Society of Illustrators.

the society column of a New Orleans newspaper. But various biographers suggest that the name was inspired by a prison warden, Orrin Henry, or even a pet cat who would respond when called "Oh, Henry." Its true origin may forever remain a mystery, but not the motivation behind it: the budding writer, profoundly ashamed of his past, used it to conceal both his identity and his deep, dark secret.

Will Porter the ex-convict would hide from the world, but O. Henry the writer would soon take the world by storm. His sentence shortened for good behavior, Will was released from prison in July 1901. There he had written 14 stories, two of which had already been published. A year later *Ainslee's* magazine invited him to New York to discuss future assignments. What was intended as a short visit became a permanent stay.

The New York that so inspired O. Henry was a teeming metropolis of elevated trains and lofty skyscrapers where hungry immigrants clamored for their share of the American dream. The author found a gold mine of stories among the multitudes who spent their days in sweatshops and their nights in speakeasies. He joined them in these haunts, listening to their personal dramas, studying their faces. After making notes on reams of yellow paper, he turned their triumphs and tragedies into poignant stories for magazines.

His big break came when he signed a contract to provide one story a week to *The New York Sunday World*. Over the next few years the name O. Henry became a household word, as readers devoured tales that reflected the bittersweet mood of their own lives and delivered the author's trademark surprise ending. Though most of his stories were about New York, the West had left an indelible mark on O. Henry, and some of his most popular tales were set in the chaparral country and dusty towns of Texas. The best of them would appear in *Heart of the West*.

But fortune did not follow fame. Although O. Henry was paid handsomely, he spent his money extravagantly. Like his father, he began to drink heavily, and his once-facile writing prowess began to drown in alcohol. He tried to regain stability by marrying Sara Coleman, a childhood sweetheart, in 1907. But within a year O. Henry's habitual drinking drove his new bride to despair, and she moved back to Greensboro. Inevitably, alcohol took its toll. O. Henry developed diabetes and cirrhosis of the liver, both of which sapped his strength. By the spring of 1910 he had become so weak that he couldn't even hold a pencil long enough to complete a story.

On the evening of June 3, O. Henry was seized with racking pain and rushed to a hospital. He died two days later, at the age of 47. His funeral was accidentally scheduled at the same time as a wedding, and as mournful words were spoken inside the church, outside a festive group laughed and celebrated. It was the final irony of O. Henry's life, a scene he himself could well have written.

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